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Guest View: Memories of being at Yuba City High School

By Art Fruhling / Special to the Appeal
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Recently, Yuba City High School celebrated its 100th anniversary.

Certainly, much history and interesting stories of events and tales of parents, students, teachers, personnel and administrators are worthy of note. What was it like going to Yuba High in years past? What teachers and students were positively impacted by their experiences? What significant events impacted Yuba City and the lives of its young people?

Since I was a full-time math teacher at Yuba City High from fall 1966 through the spring of 1987,

I can provide stories and perspectives during that period. It would be good to hear input from teachers, parents, and personnel about their time spent at the school and from their perspective!

A major demarcation in Yuba City High School's life was 1979, when collective bargaining started and salaries and working conditions were negotiated yearly. I was hired by Clarence Summy, the superintendent of the then high school district, before collective bargaining began. Larry Reynolds was the math department chairman and Pat Balch was the science department chairman. The departments were given the go ahead to hire as they saw fit. Our math and science departments had the freedom to use our subject knowledge to challenge students of all abilities.

Being new at Yuba City High, I was amazed at the high quality of education being offered to students. Whether in our department or in other departments such as English, social studies, language, wood shop, auto shop, agriculture, or art, there was creativity and a high quality of learning taking place.

Mr. Summy felt that sports helped students mature. As a result, he had sports fields and a quality gymnasium built. Many will remember the old wooden bleachers on the football field, the baseball diamonds, the tennis courts as well as practice fields.

The first two principals I remember were George Sousa and George Zerkovich. Both had coached championship football teams prior. The music program was so high quality it appeared to be a college program. The marching band could easily have marched in the Rose Parade.

Coaching staff personnel were abundant and were simply made up of various teachers and PE teachers. George Calkins (another George) coached the girls' softball team to many championships. Another teacher, Dave Dunlop, coached the tennis team. Mr. Reynolds coached the golf team.

Not to be ignored, the various hands-on shops, whether auto, woodshop, agriculture, welding, and so forth were excellent. The auto shop students were participating in a national trouble shooting contest back east every year. The woodshop had industrial quality shop tools available for use.

The music program, the concert band under the direction of Barrie Wells followed by Richard "Dick" Morrissey and the choir under the direction of Dean Estabrook, were wonderful. Students were proud to be a part of these groups.

In late spring of 1976, the tragic bus accident occurred.

Some 26 choir members were killed when their bus overturned, falling off a high off-ramp near Martinez. Families were devastated and in some cases ripped apart. The next day, two students were missing in one of my math classes, having died the previous day. I drove one of the hearses to the cemetery the day of the funeral.

A few weeks prior to this tragedy, the musical “Fiddler on the Roof” was performed at Yuba City High School. This production involved students, teachers, and community members and was a very well done high quality production. Tevye was played by the English chair Ben Morasch while Golde was played by English teacher Jane Wyville.

It brought the participants together as a family. Several of the student leads died in the bus accident. There is a memorial to the tragedy that can be found on the grounds of Yuba City’s City Hall north of the courthouse.

On the baseball field, Jim Stassi’s teams were winning local championships as well as regional playoffs in Sacramento. His teams executed beautifully and the field almost looked like a field of dreams. Many of his team played at the college level or beyond. I was the KEY (Kiwanis Educated Youth) advisor at the time and we ran the concession stand at the baseball games.

The KEY club was a youth service club sponsored by the noon Kiwanis club in Yuba City.

There must be many success stories of high school students later on in life. I remember Buddy Hyatt, a music standout, who today has a music production studio in Nashville, Tennessee. There was John Whittenbury, who wanted to be an aeronautical engineer but thought he couldn’t do the math. He is now a director of engineering at Northrop-Grumman in Virginia. Also Dr. Robert Burky, who became a local orthopedic surgeon. There was Steve Erfle, who is now a full professor of economics at Dickinson University in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. Of course, there are many other student success stories that can be told!

I left Yuba City High School in 1987, so I cannot speak beyond that date. The change to collective bargaining was overall not a positive experience for me. It changed the balance of powers away from providing educational excellence to negotiating salaries and benefits. The central office seemed to have much greater control over who was hired and the department chair people had a much weaker voice in the hiring process. Negotiations were time consuming, costly, and took valuable teaching time away from students. Of course, other personnel might have a different view than what I’ve described.

Sadly, Mr. Zerkovich died from pancreatic cancer while still principal. Then, John Dragovich became principal followed by Martha Bunce. Behind the scenes was the school manager Jack Cleveland who seemed to mysteriously keep the school humming.

There are so many other names and events of significance that many other former students and employees could describe. You are invited to send your story related to your experiences at Yuba City High School. Send your input to ADletters@appealdemocrat.com.

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